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ABSTRACT

Although most states use a single strategy for statewide assessment, one Midwestern state has chosen a model in which local school districts are responsible for developing strategies to measure and report students' progress on state-adopted content strategies. This paper describes the state assessment system and focuses on the perspectives of teachers from one school district participating in the assessment program. The school district created a team in 2000 to develop the criterion-referenced assessments (CRA) for the state content standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The 26 teachers who participated represented grades K-12 and averaged 18 years experience. Each responded to a structured interview about CRA development and implementation. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) evaluation process concerns; (2) resources; (3) instructional time challenges; and (4) professional growth. The most apparent concern of the teachers was their suspicion about how the political process would impact the accountability movement. Teachers were also emphatic about their disdain for comparing districts to each other. Many teachers were apprehensive about the future of the accountability movement, and many were concerned about eventual economic impacts of the accountability process. Teachers thought that the opportunities for training in technology had not been adequate and that they had not been trained adequately in how to write assessments. The largest source of frustration was the lack of time to develop, administer, and evaluate their assessments internally. Teachers worried about the loss of instructional time because of the additional testing, and they wondered about opportunities for professional development related to the assessments. (SLD)

Informing state assessment from the local level: A district's reflections

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Abstract

Most states use a single strategy for statewide assessment, one Midwestern state has chosen a different model. In this state local school districts are responsible for developing the strategies to measure and report students' performance on state adopted content standards. This paper briefly describes a state assessment system that relies on multiple assessments developed locally. Results from locally developed assessments that are aligned to state content standards and are integrated into a district's curriculum may be meaningful to state accountability and inform instruction in the classroom. This paper focuses on a district's perspectives following the development of their local assessments during the first year of the state assessment system. Teachers' perspectives from this common shared experience are reported and suggestions are communicated for other teachers and districts.

Informing state assessment from the local level: A district's reflections.

State student assessment programs have become a common topic recently with increased national attention. Control over methods of assessment and accountability has shifted from local jurisdictions (school districts) to state jurisdictions (departments of education and legislative agencies). It is possible that the transference of control will continue to move higher to the national level given the proposed testing requirements under President Bush's plan (Bush, 2001). The shift in control is occurring because popular media has focused its attention on the perceived shortcomings of public education. One reason for this attention may be the perception that public education has not reached the expectations placed on it. In response to these concerns, some recent efforts have sought to re-conceptualize the role of assessment in school districts and the classroom (Diaz, 2001) and how it informs learning and instruction (Shepard, 2000).

Comparisons of student performance across school districts present a challenge for states that do not have a common assessment system. Direct comparisons may not be appropriate. For one state's assessment system, this challenge is partially addressed with a low consequence accountability model. The foundation of this assessment system is at the local level where districts have the primary responsibility for determining strategies to measure student performance on state content standards in reading/writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. Using a combination of norm referenced, criterion referenced, and classroom measurement strategies, districts develop an individual assessment plan to measure the content standards. Each district's assessment plan and assessments may be unique except for the state's writing assessment that is administered across all districts.

These assessment plans are submitted and reviewed by the state's Department of Education prior to implementation. After the district's strategies are employed during the academic year, information about the quality of their assessments and their student performance are reported to the Department of Education. This information is used to produce a state report card highlighting the performance of school districts on the state's content standards. It is with this state assessment model in mind that we took a reflective in-depth look at one district's efforts to develop and implement a district assessment system in the first year of the state's program.

Background

This study was conducted in a suburban Midwestern school district. The district consists of five towns with populations ranging from under 300 to over 1,000. The district has two elementary learning centers (K-5), one middle school (6-8) and one high school (9-12). The total enrollment of the district is approximately 1,700 students, instructed by 126 certified staff. The average age of staff members is 40.1 years with 14.3 average years of experience in education.

The district created a Reading CRA Team in the spring of 2000 to develop assessments for state content standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Twenty-six teachers comprised the team representing grades K-12 whose experience ranged from one to thirty-seven years, with an average of 18 years. Language arts teachers from each grade level and building (K-5) and all language arts teachers in grades 6-12 were selected for the development team. Assessments were written under the

guidance of a regional Educational Service Unit's (ESU) professional development staff and administered during the 2000-01 academic year. Results from the first year of program implementation were shared with the Language Arts Curriculum Committee and district administration in June 2001.

Rationale for study

The purpose of this study was to gain information from the teachers that developed and implemented the criterion referenced assessments (CRA). The district's teachers will develop assessments in three other subject areas: math (2001), science (2002), and social studies (2003). These teachers' reflections and suggestions will help subsequent development teams be more efficient and effective. The Reading CRA Team members were pioneers in the district's assessment development process. The experience gained from this group's journey will assist the district in making decisions about the development and implementation of assessments in math, science and social studies.

Method

Members of the Reading CRA Team met in June of 2001 to review curriculum and analyze student performance data. As part of this meeting, the committee participated in a structured interview consisting of 10 questions. The questions included:

1. Which grade level did you work with?
2. Please estimate how many hours you spent developing your district's CRAs this year? Of these hours, how many were [compensated]?
3. What resources would have been beneficial to you prior to the assessment development process?
4. What did you learn about your grade level curriculum through the process?
5. How was your classroom affected by this process?
6. How were you able to integrate CRAs into classroom instruction?
7. How did your understanding of assessment change because of this process?
8. What assistance did you receive in the assessment development process?
9. How do you feel about the state's evaluation of your district's assessments that will occur later this summer?
10. Based on your experience, what would you recommend to other teachers who will be going through this process?

Results

The following four themes emerged from the data: 1) evaluation process concerns, 2) resources, 3) instructional time challenges, and 4) professional growth. Each of these themes will be discussed separately.

Evaluation process concerns

The most apparent concern of teachers was their suspicion about how the political process would impact the accountability movement. The most common premise revolved around how the department of education and the state legislature would use the data to potentially harm their perceptions of education. One participant indicated that reporting their district results to the state made them, "Nervous that the 'higher-ups' are using us as a political pawn." Another respondent reinforced this claim by writing that the governing bodies of the state were using this process as, "Finger-pointing. Political grandstanding." The respondent continued with, "Assessments aren't here because teachers or parents or students asked for them. This is driven by politics which seeks to place blame on real and mostly imagined problems." There was also alarm that state politics were infringing upon the traditional role of local school districts in the state. "I sense an attitude of mistrust between local districts and 'the state' regarding the quality of teaching," was one respondent's opinion.

Teachers were also emphatic in their disdain for comparing school districts to one another. Respondents reinforced their concern that rampant comparisons of school districts would occur because of the assessment results. Participants made no special mention of media, parents or students comparing scores; their concern rested at the state level. One respondent perceived a possible adversarial outcome in comparing one district against another district by stating, "I'm concerned that this information may be used to 'guide' school districts, teachers, etc. against each other – and if that happens we have defeated the purpose of these tests." Another participant went a step further when writing, "Regardless of intent, scores will be used to make comparisons." Indeed, the participants made their concerns clear that the state will use the assessment results to compare schools with one another.

Many participants had an apprehensive perspective toward the future of the accountability movement. Some teachers feared the prospect that someday a district's results on the state report card would have a financial impact on their district. "My guess is that...funding for education will be based on the results." Other respondents took a different view, showing uneasiness about the lifetime of the standard-based accountability movement. "Many new things don't make it, so I hope that doesn't happen." Finally, one respondent summarized the teachers' perspective by stating, "I'm concerned that the test becomes more important than the joy of learning."

Resources

As part of the state assessment system, individual school districts had the latitude to create criterion referenced assessments (CRA) for each of the state standards at grades 4, 8 and 11. However, teachers were neither educated nor experienced in developing formal assessments. Because the state department of education did not create a prescriptive model for the development of these CRA, districts chose different paths to progress on the learning curve. This school district used a regional educational service unit and local resources to create their assessments. According to respondents, the local district's lack of resources led to additional frustrations for teachers.

An initial hurdle for teachers was obtaining the necessary level of aptitude with technology. Teachers felt that opportunities for technology training were absent during the year. One respondent wrote, "Teachers needed to be well-trained in the use of technology if they are going to use it effectively." Another source of contention for teachers was the difficulty in finding compatibility among software programs used in various buildings throughout the district, "Technology was the most difficult part of the process. I lacked the knowledge needed to create spreadsheets, etc. Computers, when we were working, did not coincide with one another and with the many problems, we lost material and spent many hours re-doing it." Another aspect of the technological requirements related to the assistance they received from district personnel. One participant wrote, "On the days when there wasn't any help, we accomplished very little." However, not all teachers struggled with technology. Some were generally pleased with the technology available to teachers. One respondent wrote, "The district already had the technology necessary to assist in the process." Obviously, technology was one resource that caused conflict for some teachers.

Another focal point for the teachers was the training necessary to write good assessments. One teacher recommended, "[I needed] more direction in how to develop assessments. As a teacher who has to develop tests for English 11 students, I received no prior training about how to develop criterion referenced assessment tests. This meant a lot of hit and miss work before the actual tests were completed." Other teachers wondered about the quality of their assessments prior to the actual administration, "I would have liked a critiquing process to review the assessments before I gave them to students." Another respondent reflected on the perceived lack of guidelines by simply stating, "We had to start from scratch." Although teachers struggled with the development process, they were complimentary of the regional educational service units. One participant wrote, "We've had a group of people from the service unit that has helped us tremendously." Respondents' reflections upon their experience suggest the need for additional knowledge prior to development of CRA.

The largest source of frustration for teachers was their lack of time to develop, administer, and internally evaluate the assessments. All teachers mentioned the challenge of finishing the many tasks associated with developing assessments in a timely fashion. As one teacher stated, "You will give more hours to developing tests and then after you pilot you will have more revisions to make to the test." Other respondents reiterated this claim, but pointed to specific instances in the past year, "More time needs to be provided in the development stage for teachers." Another educator coupled teaching English with that of developing criterion-referenced assessments when stating, "Teaching English is simply very time-consuming. So is writing criterion referenced assessments."

Teachers were adamant in their desperate need for additional time to develop, implement, and revise assessments. The challenges of working with teachers who struggle with technology and the education necessary to write good CRA are a concern for teachers, but the issue of time reigns supreme. As one respondent wrote, "Never forget – this process takes a toll on all involved."

Instructional time challenges

Another theme that emerged from the teachers' responses was the subtraction of instructional time due to the perceived addition of further testing. Teachers approached this theme from three different perspectives: struggles in the past year, the rearrangement of their teaching objectives, and worries regarding the future.

Respondents displayed contempt for the amount of class time devoted to testing in the academic year. One participant stated, "I've had to cut several things to fit the testing in." Another participant reiterated the argument by writing, "We 'stopped' more frequently to do these formal assessments." Teachers chose to sacrifice learning activities used in the past to meet the perceived requirements of the district's assessments. One teacher wrote, "Teachers gave students independent work to free teachers to test. This led to lots of lost instruction/learning time." Students also noticed the change in teaching and learning, according to some respondents. "Students started to get tired of taking these tests and verbally complained," wrote one person.

Teachers shuffled their prior schedule of instruction to massage the assessments into the curriculum. The result was a general rearrangement of the curriculum. "During the first semester the amount of material was reduced considerably because of the criterion referenced assessment process," wrote one teacher. Another respondent wrote more explicitly about the lessons that were lost to the accountability requirements. "We had to use a lot of Accelerated Reader (individual computerized reading testing) time to do the criterion referenced assessments tasks. This is compromising one of the goals that standards are trying to measure—reading level and comprehension." Others focused displeasure with the sheer interference criterion referenced assessments created in teaching and learning. "In order to meet the test dates I was continually adjusting my goals and lesson plans. At times the test restraints affected the flow of teaching and disrupted the continuity of lessons." Clearly, teachers showed contempt for the interruptions caused by the criterion referenced assessments.

Teachers viewed the future of teaching and learning in their classroom with a cynical undertone. "I'm concerned [with] what's going to happen as we add the other criterion referenced assessments (math, science, social studies)," one individual wrote. "This will mean lots of assessing, and too much time taken away from learning." The writer continued, "This is going against everything we've spent the last couple of years trying to build: multiple intelligences, integration, modes of learning, and brain research. The standards are starting to drive everything we do." Other writers' opinions resonated with the same belief that the accountability movement is leading to the concession of additional instruction time in the future. "We are trying to teach stuff too quickly, instead of teaching a few things to a high degree of mastery," wrote a respondent. Indeed, teachers view the CRA as another mandate that compromises the time they spend educating students.

Professional growth

Teachers candidly wrote about their concerns with the accountability movement. Intermixed with their concerns about the state, the lack of resources provided to them, and the loss of instructional time, was a sense of fulfillment in completing an enormous task. Respondents wrote proudly about their increased understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The rich professional dialogue and collegiality the teachers experienced through the challenges of developing assessments were unifying factors.

Teachers became more knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction and assessment in the past year. One individual focused on newfound curricular knowledge by stating, "I feel I have a better understanding of what our grade level curriculum is." Another respondent concentrated on a positive twist that entered their classroom, "Now there is a new dimension to the class that holds students and teachers more accountable for information and test taking skills that had not been present." A third person mentioned that the process made them, "...more aware of my curriculum—always thinking about aligning to the standards." The respondent turned to assessment when continuing, "It made me more aware of how effective my lessons were—did the test [results] plot out as I figured or was there more teaching needed?" Using the assessment results to impact instruction grabbed another teacher's attention when she wrote, "I realized kids didn't know things I thought they should have. I also have implemented a few more structured activities to do this."

Besides curriculum, instruction and assessment changes, teachers wrote about the rich professional dialogue that transpired throughout the year. One teacher noticed an atmosphere of teamwork throughout the development of CRA when writing, "I feel we have a good foundation of skills developed to help students achieve." Other respondents gained insight from conversations with colleagues. One educator wrote of an experience during the assessment development process that, "...enabled me to talk with another district teacher about how they taught the curriculum." Finally, a connection between curriculum, instruction and assessment and professional dialogue occurred when one participant stated, "Many different styles of teaching have come up from discussing and brainstorming with different teachers." Although the road was long and winding, teachers appreciated the opportunity to professionally discuss educational issues.

Some teachers felt this long process created a paradigm shift in their outlook of assessment. One educator wrote, "I learned that less is more, and that focusing on a few important skills, practicing those skills until students learn them, and then testing students worked." A second participant reinforced this claim by stating that assessments, "...don't have to be long and hard to write in order to assess." Another professional growth opportunity occurred that supported good teaching practices. One respondent wrote, "These test results told me what I knew in my 'gut' and reinforced that belief." The respondent added, "I do believe I have grown as a professional." Most respondents wrote with tempered enthusiasm for CRA, though. Instead, teachers focused on the utter importance of teaching and learning. As one teacher wrote, "...student assessment is crucial, however, I do not think it should be the focal point of education. Learning should be." Indeed, teachers underwent a strenuous process, but one which facilitated a deeper understanding of being a professional educator.

Discussion

Language arts teachers across the state underwent a tremendous change in the past two years. From aligning curriculum to the state content standards to developing, implementing, and administering CRA, the role of language arts teachers in the state changed. In addition to the specific themes described above, some general underlying themes were noted in the data. These themes included: 1) a sense of bitterness about the process, 2) feelings of being overburdened, and 3) a slight difference of opinion between elementary teachers and middle school and high school teachers.

Noteworthy was the general feeling of bitterness about the lengthy process they endured. The teachers are upset. They felt like many of the steps taken throughout this two-year ordeal could have been handled more efficiently. Responsibility for this trauma was ascribed to the state's department of education and local administrators. Teachers are bitter; they believe that the rules regarding the assessment and accountability process changed midstream. Teachers were glad that this phase of the ordeal was over and did not want to go through it again. The teachers were fearful that this first round of state assessment and accountability would lead to further mandates and higher expectations for teachers.

Teachers also felt overburdened by their professional lives. Teachers struggled to meet their personal expectations in the classroom because of the immense commitment revolving around state standards and accountability. Teachers felt like they forfeited their philosophy of education in order to jump through hoops created by the state department of education. Furthermore, language arts teachers believed that CRA created unnecessary upheaval in their classrooms. The same scope and sequence that many teachers followed for a number of years was upset by the many CRA that now have to be infused into instruction, and teachers did not like this change. However, the process forced them to critically examine their curriculum and challenged past practices.

The third general observation was that elementary language arts teachers held a slightly different position toward the assessment development process than middle level teachers and high school teachers. Elementary educators focused their attention on the two themes mentioned above (bitterness and overburdened) to a higher degree than the other levels. Also, elementary teachers struggled with technology differently from the other two levels. Some of this is explained by characteristics of the selected district in that the middle and high school levels received recent upgrades in technology that has not yet extended to the elementary level. An additional explanation is that for the elementary level, the assessment development process is truly never-ending as they will also be developing the assessments for mathematics, science, and social studies in subsequent years. At the middle and high school levels, teachers are more specialized within their content area.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the structured interview was given to teachers in one school district. A variety of factors could influence the perceptions of these teachers that could be better controlled with a larger representative sample. The sample of respondents was not representative or large enough to make generalizations about the

perceptions of all language arts teachers in the state that took part in the assessment process.

The study was also limited to teachers' reflections after the first year of the assessment development process. The development and use of systematic CRA to measure student achievement was a time-consuming process involving changes in attitude and practice. Those teachers that resist change may have had more negative perceptions of the process than did teachers that were more likely to embrace change. It was unclear at times whether the comments reflected on the assessment development process or the respondent's attitudes toward change in general.

A final limitation is that one of the researchers is also the Curriculum Director. As such, some of the responses may be tempered by the fact that the research was conducted by one of the individuals responsible for the assessment development process.

Future Research

Given the uncharted waters into which districts are sailing with the new state assessment process, a follow-up study of the teachers that develop and implement the math assessments in the current school year would provide comparative data about perceptions of the assessment process. In grades K-5 most teachers will be writing the math assessments and administering assessments in math and language arts. It would be beneficial to determine if the perceptions change among teachers that have been through the process twice. An examination of teachers' perceptions in grades 6-12 would give further information on process improvement for individuals taking part in the process for the first time.

Because this study was focused on a single district, further research expansion could be conducted including other districts to better represent the perceptions of teachers statewide. This would also address one of the limitations of this study. In addition, there may be different perceptions among teachers from different sized districts. There may be some noticeable patterns between the themes identified and the size of the district.

Finally, further research is needed on districts in other states that implement classroom assessments as part of the state assessment and accountability system (e.g., Vermont, Maine) to discover whether teachers' experiences are comparable. It is unknown whether teachers from other states would have similar perceptions about developing assessments because this state assessment model is still in its infancy nationally. The use of locally developed assessments to inform state accountability is just beginning and the body of knowledge must grow if more states undertake the process.

Conclusion

This paper briefly described a state assessment system that does not rely on a statewide assessment strategy. Results from locally developed assessments that are aligned to state content standards and are integrated into the curriculum may be meaningful to state accountability, yet inform instruction in the classroom. The paper focused on a district's reflections in the development of their assessments during the first year of the state assessment system. Teachers' perspectives from this common shared experience were reported and suggestions were communicated for other teachers and districts.

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